

Adding value: Universities and their museums

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Abstract

University museums and collections – and the cultural, educational and research potential that they represent to a campus landscape – can appear at times insufficiently recognized by their host institutions as relevant and having the potential to add value to them.

This paper investigates the setting in which museums and collections and Macquarie University are currently situated in, and how that can affect the ways in which they operate.

The sector

In the past couple of decades in Australia, higher education within the university sector appears to have moved towards a managerial style as its operational directive. This re-branding of image – including descriptive language used – now sees students classified as clients; seemingly mirroring the corporate sector in this regard. While the corporatization of higher education has attracted some sustained criticism (e.g. GIROUX 2002), it is a global phenomena that intermingles business and academic cultures bringing both new challenges and new opportunities.

As a result, universities could be categorized as being concerned with defining their core business and distribution of resources (financial and human) to identified areas of significance. In strategic terms, aims are set, plans and policies are prepared, and governance is put in place, structured to achieve tangible, measurable outcomes. These areas then would be supported and favored by a system where those outcomes achieve a financial return, or create opportunities such as substantial government grants, industry linkage, patented products or processes, which give a future financial gain. Hence it is advantageous to ensure that operations within such a university are measurable against set performance indicators. Theoretically this in turn reinforces the reputation by identifying the university's unique qualities and features while encompassing all that it stands for internationally as a saleable asset. The university measures its success by reference to its improved ranking on national or international competitive tables against the performance of other universities.

Managerialism has meant that universities have undergone a change management process, where the process itself, and the outcomes of it, are meant to be positive, inclusive and encouraging, allowing projects and university processes (such as research and learning and teaching) and staff (both academic and support) to reach their full potential in a managed and progressive career path.

The vision and directions at Macquarie University have been set by the current vice-chancellor and his senior executive team, who have set the agendas for the foreseeable future. Outlined in the document, *Macquarie@50*, created by the current vice-chancellor (SCHWARTZ 2006, 2007) and supported firstly by a series of position papers (the *White Paper* from the provost, the *Research Strategic Plan* from the DVC-R) and secondly by the creation of new strategic offices in the areas of social inclusion, sustainability, community outreach, and university advancement. The latter looks to raise significant amounts of money from the general community for the University Foundation as well as faculty-based areas of study. With these documents and structures in place, those within the university, at all levels, have an understanding of where they are collectively headed in terms of institutional aspirations.

When every part and process in a complex organization such as a university is scrutinized as a way of determining what value it brings to the organisation's core business there are inevitably winners and losers. So, those in step with the set agendas could be interpreted as central to core business, and

thus seen as relevant and part of the process of ‘adding value’ to the university. They in turn are valued, and therefore supported and even encouraged, in their future endeavors as integral to university life and operation. This of course raises the questions of how does one maintain relevance and what happens to those deemed to be no longer relevant, redundant or surplus to needs?

UMACs

University museums, collections and herbaria (UMACs) are one section of a university where the question of relevance within the university landscape will become pertinent. Not all university administrators are steeped in the traditions, or an understanding of collections based research and teaching. When staff responsible for UMACs fails to convince administrators of their alignment with university aspirations and business plans, the results will obviously be declining funding and a decreased likelihood of survival. This will happen regardless of the significant nature of any items making up the collection (STANBURY 2003).

UMACs are the second oldest type of museums in the history of museum development, developing in parallel to those in the mainstream. There has always been a symbiotic relationship – and this biological metaphor is important – between universities (through their faculties and disciplines), the collections that have built up around these and the staff employed to run them. It is an organic relationship that needs to be carefully nurtured to prosper.

Collections have often been formed as a result of the acquisitive interests of one or two members of staff, and many of them began life as teaching collections before acquiring space for display and developing into museums. This pattern of development is central to the historical growth and expansion of UMACs around the world, and continues to be the model today. The questions that arise from this history, are where do UMACs fit in the university world in the 21st century, what is the on-going and future relationship to the museums sector and where do they fit in society generally? While the scope of this paper does not offer answers to these questions, it does however raise them as issues for consideration in the future.

Such questions certainly highlight the ironical relationship that is peculiar to UMACs. From a government perspective, sitting within the structural framework of a university, they are generally thought of as representing education, where mainstream, and therefore stand-alone, museums are often thought of as part of arts.

UMACs are subject to university and educational funding, while mainstream museums receive or apply for either direct or indirect government funding at the relevant level. Australia has a three-tier government structure, so support can come from ministers or granting bodies at national or state levels, or from local government budget allocations.

From the point of view of the Australian peak industry museum body, *Museums Australia*, UMACs are thought of as a ‘special interest group’ and do not share the podium side by side with mainstream museums as one might expect when, historically, both have developed in parallel.

Even the acceptance of UMACs as a special interest group is quite recent, the result of two national surveys (AUSTRALIAN VICE-CHANCELLORS’ COMMITTEE 1996, 1998) and a concerted push by those spearheading the research into UMACs nationally to be included in the peak industry body. The history of the relationship between UMAC and non-UMAC workers in Australia has been covered elsewhere (SIMPSON 2001).

The value of UMACs to many with responsibility for them (such as universities and federal government departments), only really took some shape once the total estimated value of these collections was

published (AUSTRALIAN VICE-CHANCELLORS' COMMITTEE 1996, 1998). The identified 257 UMACs in Australia had a combined asset value estimated to be between one and two billion dollars.

In New South Wales, the asset value of a UMAC has to be determined every five years by law for the Auditor-General's department and included in the *Asset Register of the University* (OFFICE OF FINANCIAL SERVICES 2011). This means a cost to the parent body which must pay for the valuation process. It also means for administrators that the results must be included in official documentation, the collections have to be stored securely, and be properly maintained in order to avoid further costs for repair or restoration, and the collections have to be fully insured.

Such on-going costs raise in the minds of university administrators and senior executives the question of, are they getting value for money? Does the existence and operation of the collection warrant the costs of maintaining it? How do they add value to the overall operation of the university?

For the directors, managers and curators of UMACs, there is a need to demonstrate that they are meeting the perceived needs of the changing climates within universities. They have to become strategic about what they do and how they go about this, so as to align ourselves to the branded image and replicate the strategic directions of our parent body. There is a need to become more entrepreneurial, to demonstrate value and worth across all sectors of core business and therefore add value to the overall operation of the university.

Traditionally, many UMACs are small-scale, surviving on the crumbs from a university's big table. Some survive with very few of these crumbs of money, and that can place them on an endangered list. In Australia, research by Simpson (2003) has shown the rapid and quite concerted decline in geological and paleontological collections that have been severely reduced both in specimen numbers and in a corresponding dramatic loss in staff positions. The same situation has also occurred outside of Australia and sometimes prompts interesting solutions (DE CLERQ 2003). Some science collections have suffered severe cut-backs, have been amalgamated to save costs or have disappeared from the UMAC sector altogether (PEARCE & SIMPSON 2010).

The *Macquarie@50* document (SCHWARTZ 2006), has a clear agenda to refocus the institution on the production of measurable research outcomes demonstrating increased research activity to bolster the university's position in ranking tables. UMACs at Macquarie University have had to consider the documents mentioned previously to refine and in some cases, redefine, activities aligning themselves to the new directions and the guiding mantras to give ourselves a competitive edge. The raft of policies and strategic documents that have subsequently been developed at faculty and discipline levels, have to be included in their documentation. University core business is re-envisioned now as focused on (MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY 2011):

- research
- learning and teaching
- quality enhancements
- business and community engagement
- social inclusion
- internationalization
- institutional advancement
- sustainability
- student life

While one could be cynical of these changes, viewing the new playing field from a 'total package' point of view, one can see that there are opportunities for UMACs to improve and maintain relevancy and develop future growth. Although there are approximately ten recognized collections at Macquarie

University, they do not all offer casual access or the possibility of interaction for research purposes. The ones that could be of interest to this discussion are the Biological Sciences Museum, the Australian History Museum, the Art Gallery and the Museum of Ancient Cultures. Macquarie University's UMACs collaboratively approached the task of facing up to the institutional changes by collecting data over the period of one year to address the following nine parameters; visitor statistics, publications, exhibitions, links with teaching units, volunteer participation, grants and other income, publicity, requests from researchers and connections to the CORES (Centres of Research Excellence, a scheme devised as part of the institutional reorientation to a research focus). Some of this data is included in the discussion below. The data represents activity levels before the UMACs responded to the new strategic directions for the university.

The two Macquarie UMACs that are the focus in this paper are the Museum of Ancient Cultures and the Art Gallery. Why select these two as a focus? What makes them an obvious choice is their track record in fostering students and future contributors to the museological field. 2012 will mark the tenth year since the core unit of the discipline of 'museum studies' was first run. The various staff members (curatorial and managerial) of both collections have been ongoing supporters of the growing discipline. The connection here between collections and discipline (even though the collections and museum studies do not sit in the same disciplines) offers its students unique access and insights into progressive museological practice in dynamic and challenging environments.

Adding value: What does this mean for the UMACs at Macquarie University?

Museum of Ancient Cultures

The Museum of Ancient Cultures sits within the ancient history department in the faculty of arts. For the Museum of Ancient Cultures, remaining relevant means a renewed focus on expanding research activity. As well as promoting research of items within its collection, a range of archaeological research is being carried out, or is in the early phases of investigation with individual, or groups of objects. Implicit in this research is publication of results.

In the initial stages of the new university strategic plan, one year of data showed little in the form of published output, there were two articles in a History Teachers' Association journal, two papyrological conference papers based on Macquarie museum material and an article referring to a Greek inscription (MU 3654) on a collection object. It was reported that other research was underway on items in the papyrus collection and publications were being developed on some cuneiform tablets, the discovery of a unique Roman potter's stamp on a bowl in the collection and work on the analysis of a mummified pigeon in the collection. There was no data available on the level of requests from researchers for access to the collection.

The museum was the site of regular discipline specific seminars, but only had formal links with two undergraduate units, one postgraduate units and a number of units offered by the Macquarie Christian Studies Institute, a separate but allied institution with a collaborative relationship with the Department of Ancient History in the delivery of programs. The museum was also used in part of the delivery of museum studies programs representing the only non-disciplinary focused teaching use of the collection and museum space.

The museum has a very successful program of outreach to high school students and is seen as integral to student recruitment in ancient history, one year of patronage attracted over 5,000 paying visitors (for education programs) generating over \$80,000 worth of income. The museum has another value of direct relevance to senior administrators as it is often used as a showcase for visiting dignitaries and is therefore in regular demand through the university's marketing and public relations group.

Because, funding applications align with the new directions of the university, the director has been successful in securing purchase monies to expand the collection. Seeding funding has resulted in a survey season at a prospective new site in Italy; expansion of this to further seasons will be dependent on the museum's ability to attract outside funding.

The community outreach programs and high school curriculum aligned education programs developed on-site build on links with feeder schools – growing potential numbers for the next generation of under graduate students – but also ensuring relationships with schools that can offer valid teacher placements in education institutions for students with ancient history streams. A large proportion of these programs are run within the museum's own gallery space (fig. 1).



Fig. 1 - The Ancient Cultures Museum gallery space © Dr Jaye McKenzie-Clark 2011

Art Gallery

Like museum studies (although museum studies is often structured as an arts subject at other universities), the Biological Sciences Museum sits in the Faculty of Science. The Museum of Ancient Cultures and the Australian History Museum at Macquarie University sit within the Faculty of Arts, and appear to be secure. However, the Art Gallery and Sculpture Park sit outside of any faculty. In the past they reported to the vice-chancellor; today they are under the Office of Institutional Advancement, the university fund-raising body. (Comments here are personal and may not reflect those of the permanent Art Gallery staff.) This relationship with the advancement office would appear to be a mismatch of operations. With the advancement office's focus on short-term fund-raising, operating on a yearly budget that is geared to achieving set outcomes – attracting monies to the university; the unit does not have an academic focus.

In the initial stages of the new university strategic plan, one year of data shows a surprising level of research output given the supposed non-academic focus of the Art Gallery. There were three major catalogues published to align with exhibitions developed, an article published in *Art and Australia*, and two conference papers presented and published, one on the sculpture park at an international conference and one on a former exhibition at a national conference. There was a total of nine different exhibitions in one calendar year. Exhibitions were also reviewed and published by external writers on five occasions during the year. Total number of visitors was not recorded but 52 different groups in the same year were booked into exhibition related activities and events.

Twenty three different teaching units used the Art Gallery during the year including indigenous studies, creative arts, cultural studies, early childhood studies, anthropology, law, English, museum studies, philosophy, marketing, physics and sociology.

The Art Gallery also works closely with the university's marketing and public relations group and is also a common destination for dignitaries and a common venue for a range of conferences held on campus that will often align with a specific exhibition.

Since then each subsequent year the Art Gallery, with two permanent staff (and contract staff employed as necessary, and when the budget allows) undertakes to research and produce unique shows that correspond to university priorities and directions and align with various faculty research initiatives. Its web site declares that the art collection offers a "broader understanding of the arts and culture to the wider community that highlight the importance of visual art and culture to education and

research" (MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY). A recent example of the ability the gallery has to reach diverse audiences would be the partnership of the Art Gallery and the Department of Physics in the production of an exhibition highlighting the importance of a highly influential holographic artist in 2010, planned to coincide with the 50th anniversary of laser technology (DAVIS & JANISZEWSKI 2010; fig. 2). While the Art



Fig. 2 - The Macquarie University Gallery during *Virtual Encounters: Paula Dawson – Holograms* (HAMMOND & JANISZEWSKI 2010) © Effy Alexakis, Photowrite 2010

Gallery often explores scientific themes in its exhibitions, this was an exploration into a medium not readily available to the viewing public, or to students of either physics or arts. This reach was further extended, as it toured to Newcastle Regional Art Gallery after finishing at Macquarie University.

Considerable long-term negotiation takes place to arrange major loans and access archives for these shows. This process can take years to achieve the planned six-yearly exhibitions and production of publications based on the research for each planned project. The staff members from the Art Gallery are research active, which aligns with the university core business directive – but which does not figure in the Office of Institutional Advancement's mission, which is specifically to undertake fundraising appeals and campaigns across the campus to create significant new revenue streams.

Many exhibitions are themed around various aspects of the existing collection that itself is significant. These are installed and rotated in the Art Gallery space, while until recently a major portion of the collection was also on permanent display in the old library space. That has now disappeared as the

old library has been closed up and the new library does not accommodate the permanent art display. Such decisions are financial, given that, like so many others, there are budgetary constraints.

A line of discussion sometimes raised concerns the validity of a university that does not offer 'fine arts'. This then leads to tired arguments over the expending of capital on an art gallery (and its collection) that produces the quantity of changing exhibitions that Macquarie University's gallery does each year. Fortunately, the university is not so short sighted as to enter into this uneducated and out-of-date line of debate. Such an argument would ignore the value of art to all educatory pathways and to the on-campus quality of experience offered by access to quality visual art as inspiration for education and research purposes.

Although the various university faculties that interact with it are aware of its potential, the location of the art gallery within the current university structure could be interpreted as problematic and counter to the inclusive nature of both the exhibition space historically and the research focus of the university's current directive. Attachment to the advancement office could be interpreted as an exercise in window dressing for fund raising purposes and therefore a complete compromise of the intellectual integrity of the art gallery per se. As part of the advancement team, the art gallery staff undertakes to fulfill roles set out by their management team – as well as the core business interests of the university. Fulfilling the role required by the Office of Institutional Advancement, while trying not to jeopardize the long-standing relationships with galleries, artists and other institutions built up over years, offers its own set of challenges but is unavoidable, as failure to comply could spell a threat to the long-term survival of the art gallery.

Conclusion

Although limited by permanent staffing numbers and budget constraints necessary in the current economic climate, both institutions work towards meeting the core business directives of research, learning and teaching, community engagement and social inclusion. Currently there is no suggestion that either collection is under any immediate threat – however there is an imperative on those that run these collections to continue to work at ensuring those collections are seen to value and align tightly with the strategic directions and academic purposes of the university. It is inadvisable to assume one can rely on benevolence as a survival tactic.

While Australia was fortunate to survive the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) relatively intact, some areas have not fared so well. The pressure as governments' make adjustments in this weakened climate has the potential to affect all levels of the economies of scale – it may be that in the future UMACs can expect to bear additional pressure on their collections to those they currently experience. Hence the increased need to continually re-assure the parent body of the value its own UMACs adds to the university core business.

Post Script

This paper was presented in September 2011. This year the current vice-chancellor has announced his intention to retire by the end of 2012. Additionally, shortly after this paper was presented, at his request the Macquarie University Art Gallery has been re-located to sit administratively within the Faculty of Arts. Transfer of responsibility for the gallery budget to that faculty will be effective of January 2012. It will be of great interest to see how the Macquarie University Art Gallery develops under this new reporting structure.

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